

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

**Remarks Following a Meeting With President Mahmoud Abbas of the
Palestinian Authority and an Exchange With Reporters**

May 28, 2009

President Obama. Hello, everybody. Well, it is a great pleasure to welcome President Abbas to the Oval Office. We had—we just completed an extensive conversation, both privately as well as with our delegations, about how we can advance peace in the Middle East and how we can reaffirm some core principles that I think can result in Palestinians and Israelis living side by side in peace and security.

As I've said before, I've been a strong believer in a two-state solution that would provide the Israelis and Palestinians the peace and security that they need. I am very appreciative that President Abbas shares that view. And when Prime Minister Netanyahu was here last week, I reiterated to him that the framework that's been provided by the roadmap is one that they can advance the interests of Israel, can advance the interests of the Palestinian people, and can also advance the interests of the United States.

We are a stalwart ally of Israel, and it is in our interests to assure that Israel is safe and secure. It is our belief that the best way to achieve that is to create the conditions on the ground and set the stage for a Palestinian state as well. And so what I told Prime Minister Netanyahu was, is that each party has obligations under the roadmap. On the Israeli side, those obligations include stopping settlements; they include making sure that there is a viable potential Palestinian state. On the Palestinian side, it's going to be important and necessary to continue to take the security steps on the West Bank that President Abbas has already begun to take, working with General Dayton. We've seen great progress in terms of security in the West Bank. Those security steps need to continue because Israel has to have some confidence that security in the West Bank is in place in order for us to advance this process.

And I also mentioned to President Abbas in a frank exchange that it was very important to continue to make progress in reducing the incitement and anti-Israel sentiments that are sometimes expressed in schools and mosques and in the public square, because all those things are impediments to peace.

The final point that I made was the importance of all countries internationally, but particularly the Arab States, to be supportive of a two-state solution. And we discussed how important it is that the Arab States, building off of some of the recognition of the possibilities of the two-state solution that are contained in the Arab Peace Initiative, continue to provide economic support as well as political support to President Abbas's efforts as he moves the Palestinian Authority forward, as he continues to initiate the reforms that have taken place, and as he hopefully is going to be able to enter into constructive talks with the Israelis.

So, again, I want to thank President Abbas for his visit and a very constructive conversation. I am confident that we can move this process forward if all the parties are willing to take on the responsibilities and meet the obligations that they've already committed to and if they keep in mind not just the short-term tactical issues that are involved, but the long-term strategic interests of both the Israelis and the Palestinians to live side by side in peace and security.

So thank you again, Mr. President, for being here.

President Abbas. Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. President, for receiving us here at the White House. We came here to tell you, first of all, that we congratulate you for the confidence that was expressed by the American people in electing you the President of the United States. And we wish you all success in your mission.

Mr. President, you refer to the international commitment as the—stipulated in the roadmap. I would like to take this opportunity to reaffirm to you that we are fully committed to all of our obligations under the roadmap, from the A to the Z. And we believe, like you, Mr. President, that carrying out the obligations of all parties under the roadmap will be the only way to achieve the durable, comprehensive, and just peace that we need and desire in the Middle East.

Mr. President, I believe that the entire Arab world and the Islamic world, they are all committed to peace. We've seen that through the Arab League peace initiative that simply talks about land for peace as a principle. I believe that if the Israelis would withdraw from all occupied Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese land, the Arab world will be ready to have normal relationships with the State of Israel.

On our part, we are carrying our security and responsibility in the West Bank, and have law and order in that areas under our control because we believe that it is in our interest to have security. It's in the interest of stability in the region. And, here, I would like to pay tribute and thank you to General Dayton and all those who work with him in helping and supporting and training our security organizations to carry out their duties and responsibilities.

Mr. President, I believe that time is of the essence. We should capitalize on every minute and every hour in order to move the peace process forward, in order to cement this process, in order to achieve the agreement that would lead to peace.

Thank you very much.

President Obama. Thank you. We got time for a couple questions.

Julianna [Julianna Goldman, Bloomberg].

President's Upcoming Visit to Saudi Arabia/Saudi Arabia-U.S. Relations/Energy

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. I'm going to ask you a question about your trip next week to Riyadh. Reducing U.S. dependence on foreign oil is the cornerstone of your energy policy. And when you meet with Riyadh's King Abdallah next week, what message will you take to him about U.S. energy policy, oil prices, output quotes, and the like?

President Obama. Well, you know, Saudi Arabia has been an important strategic partner in providing us with our critical energy needs. We appreciate that. It's a commercial relationship as well as a strategic relationship. And I don't think that it's in Saudi Arabia's interests or our interests to have a situation in which our economy is dependent on, or better yet, is disrupted constantly by huge spikes in energy prices. And it's in nobody's interest, internationally, for us to continue to be so heavily dependent on fossil fuels that we continue to create the greenhouse gases that threaten the planet.

So in those discussions, I'll be very honest with King Abdallah, with whom I've developed a good relationship, indicating to him that we're not going to be eliminating our need for oil imports in the immediate future; that's not our goal. What our goal has to be is to advance the clean energy solutions in this country that can strengthen our economy, put people back to work, diversify our energy sources.

And, you know, interestingly enough, you're seeing the Saudis make significant investments both in their own country and outside of their country in clean energy, as well, because I think they recognize that we've got finite—we have a finite supply of oil. There are going to be a whole host of countries like China and India that have huge populations, need to develop rapidly.

If everybody is dependent solely on oil as opposed to energy sources like wind and solar, if we are not able to figure out ways to sequester carbon—and that would allow us to use coal in a nonpolluting way—if we don't diversify our energy sources, then all of us are going to be in trouble. And so I don't think that will be a difficult conversation to have.

Yes, sir.

Middle East Peace Process

[At this point, a reporter asked a question in Arabic, and no translation was provided. The reporter then asked a question in English, as follows.]

Q. And, Mr. President, what if Israel keeps declining to accept the two-state solution and to freeze the settlement activities, how will the U.S.—would intervene in the peace process?

President Obama. Well, I think it's important not to assume the worst, but to assume the best. And in my conversations with Prime Minister Netanyahu, I was very clear about the need to stop settlements; to make sure that we are stopping the building of outposts; to work with the Palestinian Authority in order to alleviate some of the pressures that the Palestinian people are under in terms of travel and commerce, so that we can initiate some of the economic development plans that Prime Minister Netanyahu himself has said are so important on the ground.

And that conversation only took place last week. I think that we don't have a moment to lose, but I also don't make decisions based on just a conversation that we had last week, because, obviously, Prime Minister Netanyahu has to work through these issues in his own Government, in his own coalition, just as President Abbas has a whole host of issues that he has to deal with.

But I'm confident that if Israel looks long term—looks at its long-term strategic interests, then it will recognize that a two-state solution is in the interests of the Israeli people as well as the Palestinians. And, certainly, that's how the United States views our long-term strategic interests: a situation in which the Palestinians can prosper, they can start businesses; they can educate their children; they can send them to college; they can prosper economically. That kind of situation is good for Israel's security. And I am confident that the majority of the Israeli people would see that as well.

Now, obviously, the Israelis have good reason to be concerned about security, and that's why it's important that we continue to make progress on the security issues that so often end up disrupting peace talks between the two parties.

[An English translation for the question asked in Arabic was provided by the interpreter, as follows.]

Interpreter. The other question was to President Abbas.

President Abbas, you've met with President Obama, and perhaps you shared some of your ideas about permanent status resolution. What was in these ideas, and what kind of appropriate mechanism that you have discussed to realize them and carry them out?

President Abbas. We have shared some ideas with the President, but all of them basically are embodied in the roadmap and the Arab League initiative, without any change, without any modification.

Regarding the mechanism to carry it out, of course, there is a mechanism through the Quartet as well as the followup committee from the Arab nations. Such a proposal will need to be looked at, studied; then we'll see where to go from here.

President Obama. Christi [Christi Parsons, LA Times].

President's Upcoming Visit to the Middle East/Middle East Peace Process

Q. Do you plan to unveil any part or all of your proposal for Mideast peace when you're speaking in Cairo next week, or is it some other message you intend to deliver?

President Obama. I want to use the occasion to deliver a broader message about how the United States can change for the better its relationship with the Muslim world. That will require, I think, a recognition on both the part of the United States as well as many majority Muslim countries about each other, a better sense of understanding and, I think, the possibilities of achieving common ground.

I want to emphasize the importance of Muslim Americans in the United States and the tremendous contributions they make, something that, I think, oftentimes, is missed in some of these discussions. But, certainly, the issue of Middle East peace is something that is going to need to be addressed. It is a critical factor in the minds of many Arabs in countries throughout the region and beyond the region. And I think that it's—it would be inappropriate for me not to discuss those. I'm not going to give you a preview right now, Christi, but it's something that we'll certainly discuss.

One thing that I didn't mention earlier that I want to say I very much appreciate is that President Abbas, I think, has been in—under enormous pressure to bring about some sort of unity government and to negotiate with Hamas. And I am very impressed and appreciative of President Abbas's willingness to steadfastly insist that any unity government would have to recognize the principles that have been laid out by the Quartet.

In the absence of a recognition of Israel and a commitment to peace and a commitment to previous agreements that have already been made, it would be very hard to see any possibility of peace over the long term. And so I want to publicly commend President Abbas for taking that position, because I think it's a position that's in the interest of the Palestinian people, in the interests of peace in the region, and it's something that the United States very much agrees with.

Middle East Peace Process

[A reporter asked two questions in Arabic, and no translation was provided. The reporter then asked a question in English, as follows.]

Q. Mr. President, if I may, President Bush hoped that he would have a Palestinian state by the time he leaves office. It didn't happen. Do you have a time frame when this Palestinian state is going to happen? Are you—are we talking about a timetable for negotiation?

[An English translation for the questions asked in Arabic was provided by the interpreter, as follows.]

Interpreter. The first question to President Abbas: Mr. President, did you receive any kind of clear-cut commitments from President Obama, or any pledges that would help you to strengthen your hands when you are dealing with the Palestinian public and opposition among Palestinians that this peace process activities could be viable and could be actually productive?

And the second question was, did President Obama ask you to have a meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu?

President Abbas. President Obama basically talked and reaffirmed the international commitments that we all agreed to, and they are all embodied in the roadmap. He talked about the necessity to have two states; he talked about the importance of stopping settlement activities; and he also talked about the importance of achieving peace through negotiating all permanent status issues.

Obviously, without discussing and negotiating permanent status issues there will be no progress. We know that all the six issues of permanent status were discussed with the previous Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Olmert, and what it—is needed right now is to resume the discussions with the current Israeli Government.

President Obama. And in terms of a timetable, I have not put forward a specific timetable. But let me just point out, when I was campaigning for this office, I said that one of the mistakes I would not make is to wait until the end of my first term, or the end of my second term, before we've moved on this issue aggressively. And we've been true to that commitment.

From the first week that I arrived in this office, I've insisted that this is a critical issue to deal with, in part because it is in the United States interest to achieve peace. The absence of peace between Palestinians and Israelis is a impediment to a whole host of other areas of increased cooperation and more stable security for people in the region, as well as the United States. And so I want to see progress made, and we will work very aggressively to achieve it.

I don't want to put an artificial timetable, but I do share President Abbas's feelings, and I believe that many Israelis share the same view that time is of the essence, that we can't continue with a drift, with the increased fear and resentments on both sides, the sense of hopelessness around the situation that we've seen for many years now. We need to get this thing back on track. And I will do everything I can, and my administration will do everything I can. My special envoy, George Mitchell, is working as diligently as he can, as is my entire national security team, to make sure that we jumpstart this process and get it moving again.

All right. Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:15 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel; Lt. Gen. Keith W. Dayton, USA, U.S. security coordinator to Israel and the Palestinian Authority; King Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Saud of Saudi Arabia; and George J. Mitchell, U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace. President Abbas referred to former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel. President Abbas and some reporters spoke in Arabic, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters :: White House; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Palestinian Authority :: President Abbas.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Abbas, Mahmoud "Abu Mazen"; Dayton, Keith W.; King Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud; Mitchell, George J.; Netanyahu, Benjamin.

Subjects: Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies; Energy : Carbon dioxide emissions, reduction; Energy : Coal and clean coal technologies; Energy : Developing countries, energy sources; Energy : Foreign sources; Energy : Gasoline, oil, and natural gas costs; Energy : Solar and wind energy; Environment : Climate change; Israel : East Jerusalem and West Bank, withdrawal of settlements; Israel : Prime Minister; Israel : Relations with U.S.; Israel : U.S. security coordinator to Israel and the Palestinian Authority; Middle East : Peace and democracy efforts; Middle East : President Obama's visit; Middle East : Relations with U.S.; Middle East : U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace; Palestinian Authority and Palestinians : Economic growth and development; Palestinian Authority and Palestinians : Hamas political-paramilitary organization; Palestinian Authority and Palestinians : International assistance ; Palestinian Authority and Palestinians : President; Palestinian Authority and Palestinians : U.S. security coordinator to Israel and the Palestinian Authority; Saudi Arabia : Energy :: Alternative and renewable sources and technologies; Saudi Arabia : King; Saudi Arabia : Relations with U.S.

DCPD Number: DCPD200900409.